

LIVING ON A PURPOSE

Have you ever wondered what your purpose in life is? The reasons you were brought into this world? Have you ever took time to ponder upon these fundamental questions??

I had. And I still do, although less often than before.

A purpose in life is a human basic need although many of us don't realise it.

Then did you think that We created you uselessly and that to Us you would not be returned?

Al-Mu'minun 23: 115

Many of us live each day chasing things of which we are unsure of. We either lead a carefree life, living by the day and not thinking too much about the future, or a life that is focused on achieving specific goals or objectives, usually short term and individualistic. These approaches get us through the day and at times, give us a sense of achievement. But then, it fails to give us real self-satisfaction. We end up feeling empty inside, struggling to find fulfillment in the things we do.

Without a purpose, our life does not bring much meaning. It only represents our present self and not what we can become.

We fail to see and create a bigger agenda besides ourselves. The negative effects are apparent – loss of direction, frustration over failures, identity crisis, live to please others, lack of sense of belonging – these are some of the common effects and negative reactions due to the absence of a purpose. We usually end up desperately searching for closure, which will be difficult to find unless we answer the fundamental question – what is our purpose in life?

The question sounds simple and straightforward but it may be one of the most difficult question to answer. Fundamentally, the answer would define who we are and what we are fighting for in life. The road to discover this purpose requires a lot of self-reflection and honesty. More importantly, it requires us to dedicate time to actually think about it.

The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.

Mark Twain, American author and humorist

For Muslims, the process of discovering our purpose is made simpler as we are given guidance on the basic reason we are brought to this world. No matter how much we define our personal purpose, ultimately everything we do should be for Allah. Provided that our actions are driven by the right intention and substance, it passes as an act of worship to Him.

And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me.

Adh-Dhariyat 51: 56

We are also given the recognition and responsibility to be His representatives or vicegerents on earth. A vicegerent, or *khalifah*, is a person exercising delegated power on behalf of a sovereign or ruler of which Allah is the ruler of everything. Humans succeed each other in the role of improving the

world for and on behalf of Allah, implementing His rules and observing His commands. We are given the trust of doing so due to His knowledge on our ability to learn, choose and build.

And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority." They said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" Allah said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know."

Al-Baqarah 2: 30

This guidance provides us with a good point to start off. All that is left to do is to then build our personal purpose around it so that we are able to achieve happiness of both this world and the next.

Purpose vs. Objectives – Similar yet Different

At one glance, both terms might seem the same. In the corporate world, we use the two terms interchangeably. However, in essence, they are relatively different.

Objectives are basically goals; things aimed or sought. In many cases, they are plural rather singular; we can have a set of objectives rather than just one. Objectives are usually specific in nature – a goal we want to achieve with a specific timeframe to achieve it, usually short to middle term.

For example, an objective might mean targeting a career promotion by a specific period – let's say to become a CEO in five years' time, to get married at a specific age, to climb Mount Everest before we die or even to buy a sports car using our next annual bonus payout. On a personal basis, objectives or goals are usually self-driven and individualistic.

Even for groups of people or at an organisation level, objectives are specific to the interest of the group or organisation rather than society at large. For example, to achieve a specific group monthly sales target or to win the next World Cup; a dream for all national football teams.

A purpose on the other hand is fundamental – the reason for which something is done or created or for which something exists. Although some of us may define more than one purpose for ourselves, ultimately there would be a core purpose that forms the foundation of who we are. There is no specific duration for it. In theory, a purpose should not have an expiry date. Nevertheless, many do change their purpose along the way but then success is usually attained by staying true to our purpose.

Definiteness of purpose is the starting point of all achievement.

W. Clement Stone, businessman, philanthropist and self-help book author

Purpose – It starts with Intention

In spirit and in practice, purpose can also be equated to intention, which is given a strong emphasis and attention in Islam. Everything we do will be judged based on our intention or purpose. Depending on our intention, an action can either be taken as an act of worship or otherwise.

***It was narrated from Abu Hurairah that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said:
“People will be resurrected (and judged) according to their intentions.”***

Ibn Majah

Subsequently, we will be rewarded according to our intentions. There is a direct correlation between intention and rewards (or results), which can be both tangible and intangible in nature.

'Umar bin Al-Khattab reported: Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "The deeds are considered by the intentions, and a person will get the reward according to his intention. So whoever emigrated for Allah and His Messenger, his emigration will be for Allah and His Messenger; and whoever emigrated for worldly benefits or for a woman to marry, his emigration would be for what he emigrated for".

Bukhari and Muslim

The better the intention, the greater the reward and the higher the status of a person would be. Rewards or status is granted in tandem with the goodness of an intention and the efforts put in to execute it. This was made clear to us in the examples mentioned by our beloved Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).

It was narrated that Abu Hurairah said: "I heard the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) say: 'Whoever comes to this mosque of mine, and only comes for a good purpose, such as to learn or to teach, his status is like that of one who fights in Jihad in the cause of Allah.

Whoever comes for any other purpose, his status is that of a man who is keeping an eye on other people's property.'

Narrated by Ibn Majah. Graded Hasan

Discovering Purpose – My Story

I remember vividly the day I was introduced to the “living a purpose” concept by my mentor some time back in 2003. I was fortunate to have learned the concept at an early stage in life, discovering it during the first few months of my career – my management trainee days.

As part of the programme, we were assigned a task to formally request a senior management team member to be our mentor. Although I had already informally considered my mentor as one, it was only proper for me to officially request it from him after receiving the task.

The night I approached and officially ‘proposed’ to him to be my mentor, we were holding a cocktail reception at KL Tower to entertain our brokers. Being the stubborn me, despite it not being the best occasion to put forward such a request, I proceeded to ask him anyway. The moment I saw a chance, I went up to him and expressed my intention.

Him being him, he welcomed my request with a smile and comfortably said yes. I was obviously delighted to have my favorite senior management team member agreeing to be my mentor.

Not long after that, he pulled me aside to have a chat and gave me the first assignment as his mentee. He asked me a relatively simple question, “what is your purpose in life?”

I initially thought that it was such a simple question (as it had *sounded* simple) that I could easily answer. Noticing my eagerness to provide an answer, he immediately stopped me before I could even attempt to do so. He subsequently told me to go back and give it some serious thought before providing him with an answer. We agreed to discuss it at his office the next day.

When I went back and actually spent time pondering on the question, I found difficulties in coming up with an answer. Half of the time, I kept wondering what he had actually meant with the question. By the end of the night, I could only come up with a line that I personally thought was too simple and general – to be a better person and to help others do the same.

The next day, as promised, I went over to his office and we started to discuss the answer that I came up with. It was during this session that I started to understand the “living a purpose” concept. He shared how having a purpose had changed his life entirely, as taught to him by his mentor during the early days of his career.

As told to me, prior to having a purpose in life, he had always lived a life chasing goals that he had set for himself. During this period of his life, just like many of us, what he wanted most was progress in his career and a good paycheck, which over time he managed to achieve. It was not an easy ride – with a mindset focused on goals, he ended up really frustrated each time he fails to achieve a target.

Nevertheless, after numerous frustrations, at the age of 30, he got promoted to a manager position, earning a handsome salary of RM4,000 (which was a lot in the mid-1990s) just as he had targeted five years earlier. However, despite achieving what he wanted, he felt empty inside.

The feeling did not go away even after achieving his next promotion to become a senior manager with a five figure salary – he still could not find fulfillment in what he was doing.

Trying to find answers to his dilemma, he approached his mentor for guidance. This is when he was taught the life-changing concept of having a purpose in life.

Since that day, he changed his approach in life and dedicated it to living his purpose, something quite similar to the one I came up with – to help others be the best they can be. In order to live such a noble purpose, he also needed to continuously improve himself, which he continuously did through a lot of sharing, learning and at the core of it, hard work.

Back then, he was a marketer responsible for bringing in business. Among his main tasks was to develop the competencies and skillsets of the distribution force. He found it easy to do as it was something close to his purpose in life – helping the sales personnel become better at what they do. Eventually, his approach and efforts started to show good results – sales went up tremendously.

People started to wonder about the person responsible for bringing in the great results. Once they managed to put the pieces together, it was not difficult for them to pinpoint the success to him. He was rewarded and recognised accordingly – a good bonus, a high increment and a promotion, all in a package.

I had the chance to work with him for a significant number of years after that – 8 years to be exact, and had the chance to observe him living his purpose to the best of his ability. By consistently and passionately living his purpose, he managed to rise to the top of the corporate ladder and eventually became the CEO of three Takaful operators.

But what was more important and obvious was that I saw the satisfaction he got from living his purpose – how he enjoyed helping others become better people.

Since that day, I have been trying hard to live my purpose as well. I must say, it has been fulfilling and rewarding till date. I had a good share of achievements myself after adopting this approach in life. Among the biggest achievement was becoming a senior management team member of a Takaful operator at the age of 28, which was quite unlikely for someone at such a young age.

Living on my purpose even created opportunities for me to visit beautiful countries such as Morocco (for free!). In 2014, I was invited (together with two of my closest brother and sister) to go to Casablanca to share our experiences in setting up a Takaful operator. It started just by fulfilling favors from great brothers I met in March 2012; brothers Hakim and Said – two enthusiastic gentlemen who wanted to start off a Takaful operation in Morocco. Moved by their eagerness and enthusiasm, I helped out with their queries on Takaful through emails ever since we met – it was just that. Who would have thought that they would have flown us in?

But what I take pride most is seeing the people I had helped become successful. Seeing people who I have trained and guided become prominent and successful individuals. Nothing can beat the satisfaction and joy such moments brings – it gets me going.

I am not saying that it is wrong to have goals or objectives – it is still a critical part of the equation. People do need some self-driven goals to motivate and push themselves. Everybody desires to be recognised and rewarded. I do have some goals and objectives myself but it is important to note that they are not the center of attention in my life.

Objectives are a subset to support the purpose; they are not the main intention.

A Beautiful Purpose Model

I was browsing through *LinkedIn* when I found an eye catching diagram that immediately caught my attention. The diagram perfectly describes purpose and the relationship it has with the various aspects of a person's life. I made a quick search on the web looking out for its origins but my efforts met little success. Though many people were using the diagram in their personal blogs, none were, disappointingly, the original author.

Surprisingly and interestingly, the link that I found while tracing back the origins of the diagram directed me to an online business website – Hustle & Grind, a two-man outfit based in Canada that promotes coffee and inspirational quotes online. They have a great website full of motivational quotes and blog entries dedicated to entrepreneurship and working hard.

If they were closer to Malaysia, I would have made an online order of their package just so that I could get my hands on the goodies that accompanied the coffee beans – inspirational posters, mugs and other merchandise.

I sincerely believe it is a superb diagram that accurately describes “living on a purpose” – structured in a way that people can easily relate to.

As there is no specific interpretation of the diagram, I will attempt to elaborate it based on my own understanding and assumptions.

In principle, what we want to achieve is for our purpose to be aligned to the four factors identified, where each of it has a different impact on an individual’s behaviors and/or surroundings.



“Purpose” Venn diagram by Hustle & Grind

Passion

An intense desire or enthusiasm for something. Doing something that you really love and enjoy doing.

Mission

Important goals that are accompanied by strong conviction. The things you want to achieve.

Profession	A paid (or unpaid) occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification – how you earn your living.
Vocation	A strong impulse or inclination to follow a particular activity or career, a strong feeling of suitability for a particular career or occupation.

When a purpose is aligned to two of the factors, it will result in an achievement or condition.

Passion + Mission = You love it	When your purpose represents your passion and mission, you are going to enjoy living your purpose to the fullest. It is going to be a very fulfilling journey as you get to achieve the important goals in life while loving each moment of it.
Passion + Profession = You are great at it	When your purpose meets both your passion and your job, you are going to be very good at doing it. Driven by the joy of doing it, you will perform extremely well.
Profession + Vocation = You are paid for it	When your purpose meets both what you do and your suitability of doing it, needless to say, you will get paid for it. Earning while doing something that fits your character.

Mission + Vocation	When your purpose represents the goals you are
= The world needs it	striving for and at the same time, is something you are suitable or inclined to do, and/or something that is called by religion, it would most probably result in something that would contribute to the society at large. Something that is needed by the community.

Now imagine if your purpose is aligned with all four factors – it's a home run! You get to enjoy living your purpose and being great at it, at the same time getting paid for it. Even better, after fulfilling your individual needs, you are also contributing to the betterment of the world. How about that for a package!

Setting a Purpose

Setting a purpose is fundamentally the most important thing to do for anyone. It defines who you are and what you represent; it is the foundation that sets the direction of your life. You would not want to change your purpose every other day – your purpose should set you for life.

This is why it is so important for us to dedicate a considerable amount of time to come up with our purpose. A purpose sets us focused on a guided path rather than having to figure out a goal to achieve each time we wake up from bed.

I remember those days right after high school when I was living a carefree life with no direction whatsoever. It was as simple as can be – hanging out with friends till late night, waking up late the next morning and repeating it all over again.

As much as it was fun and stress-free, my life back then was basically empty. I wasn't bringing any benefits to the world or even myself.

After understanding the fundamentals of a purpose and taking guidance from the beautiful purpose model, we can summarise some guiding principles in coming up with a purpose in life.

1. Align to the ultimate purpose, everything is for Allah.

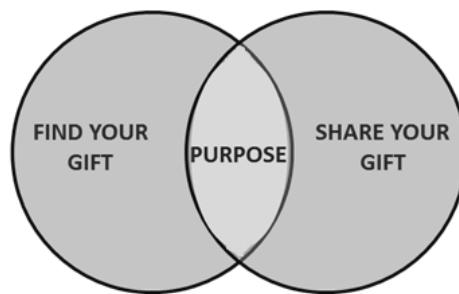
As mentioned before, as Muslims we have already been given the ultimate purpose of us being created; to worship the one and only Creator, Allah. Hence, anything we come up with should be in line with this ultimate purpose.

2. Stay true to yourself and what you believe in.

Do not ever attempt to copy another person's purpose and make it yours. You need to be true to yourself on what you truly believe in. For the sake of illustration, not everyone wants to help others be a better person; it is just not their cup of tea. Most probably it is not that they do not want to but their character does not support such purpose – highly likely for very introvert personalities. Each person would have a purpose suited for him or her. It could be as simple as being a good mother. Search hard deep inside of you to find the answers and commit to it once you've found it.

3. Think big! It is not only about you!

Purpose is never a short term thing. This is something we should always keep in mind. You need to think "Big Picture" rather than short term goals or targets. As much as it fundamentally defines you, it should not just be about you.



Another cool diagram by Hustle & Grind

Look at how your purpose will affect your surroundings or even the world for that matter. The more it benefits others besides yourself, the closer you are to solving your puzzle.

4. Good intentions only.

A purpose should never be based on evil intentions. It needs to be as good as it gets. To start with, there is no way for your purpose to be aligned to the ultimate purpose Allah has set for us if you have an evil purpose in mind. In an indirect way, your purpose represents the values you carry; it represents your values system.

5. Logical and achievable. Easily explainable to others and represents who you are.

There is no point coming up with a purpose that does not make any sense both in meaning and in terms of achievement. Sometimes simplicity is best for the fundamental matters in life. Don't bother using bombastic words or concepts when half way through it, you can't even remember what you meant when you first came up with it. Your purpose will represent who you are and it only makes sense for you to be able to easily explain it to others when asked about it. If you can't even string the words together to explain

your purpose, then you better revisit it quickly and start making sense out of it.

Another trick my mentor taught me some time later in coming up with a purpose was to imagine writing down your own obituary and answering a simple question: "how do you want to be remembered when you are no longer around?"

This is another method or indirect way of asking the same question of "what is your purpose in life?" However, the question is positioned in a way that is easier for us to ponder on rather than directly answering it.

Feel free to choose a method you are comfortable with bottom line, you need to establish your purpose in life – that's fundamental.

Living on a Purpose – Maintaining on Track

Once we have managed to come up with a purpose in life, the next thing to do is to actually live it. This is the hard part where many of us fail to live up to it. We want people to remember us as how define ourselves i.e. our purpose in life, but then we live life the total opposite way.

Sad but true.

How did this happen in the first place?

You will be reading this reason a lot throughout this compilation. It remains an undeniable and unchangeable fact that we humans are forgetful creatures. We are easily swayed from our purpose – easily influenced by our surroundings and life experiences, giving in to temptations around us. We are badly affected by each failure we endure. These are common situations that we will face from time to time. It is how life is designed and organised, there is no way we can change it.

However, there are always ways to manage it.

If there is no conscious effort of having a check and balance on how we live against our purpose, there is a high likelihood that we will end up living the opposite.

But if we continuously put an effort at –

- firstly, living our purpose to the fullest; and
- secondly, being honest to ourselves when we reflect and measure how we live against our purpose,

we can actually make it work for us.

Success is achievable, there is no doubt about it. But like many other things in life, it requires dedication and commitment to make it happen. Living our purpose does not come without challenges, that's a given. It takes a lot of perseverance for us to be able to continuously maintain on track.

1. Remain focused on your purpose. Keep yourself reminded.

Focus has always been an issue for us; we just can't focus for a long period of time. A research states that the average human attention span is approximately five minutes. Another research states that humans can only sustain attention on a particular item or matter for not more than twenty minutes. However, we can repeatedly choose to re-focus on it.

This is why it is very important for us to always take stock of our life and keep reminding ourselves about our purpose in life – we will be easily swayed from it if we don't continuously put an effort to do so. There will always be people who will try to pull us away from our purpose for whatever reasons, most of the time just to have fun. Stay focus and live it how we have committed, stick to the plan.

2. Don't focus on results, focus on processes.

Among the more common mistakes humans do in managing life is putting too much focus on results until we forget to focus on the processes required to achieve it. The result is the end game but getting there is what matters. This is the reason why a purpose in life is ongoing instead of a definite end. It is what we need to do to live it that is important and not what we gain at the end of it.

3. Reality check – measure yourself from time to time. Get feedbacks if necessary.

Living a purpose is supposed to be something that eventually forms part of your life; more accurately it is supposed to be how you live your life. As such, over time, without a checking mechanism in place, it is highly likely that we will end up complacent. Worst still if we end up not living our purpose at all. Hence, it is important for us to have a reality check from time to time – perform self-assessment on ourselves and get feedbacks from our closest, most honest friends. This would help in ensuring that we are always kept on our toes.

4. Challenges are inevitable. It is getting through it that matters.

Doing something good always comes with challenges. If we were to study the stories of the Prophets, we will notice two similar trends in their lives – first, they lived a common purpose, which was to spread the religious message on the oneness of Allah and second, it was filled with challenges. Facing it with perseverance and patience got them to success.

These are the stories of the Prophets, people who are dearly loved by Allah. Even they are inflicted with great trials and challenges, what more normal people like us?

But there is always light at the end of the tunnel, even if we can't clearly see it yet. Allah had already promise us, if we are patient in facing difficulties and challenges, we will reap success at the end.

Verily, with every difficulty there is relief.

Ash-Sharh 94: 6

And be patient, for indeed, Allah does not allow to be lost the reward of those who do good.

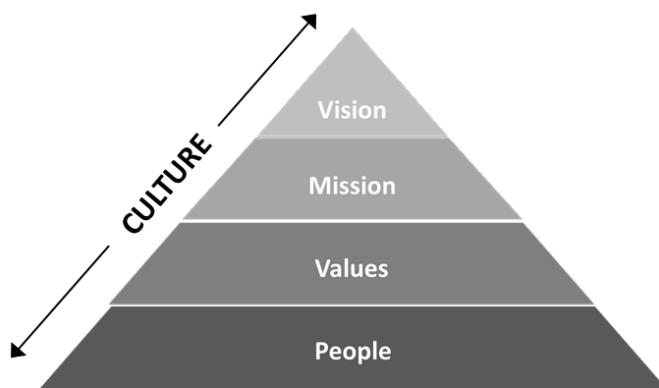
Hud 11: 115

5. Have fun living it!

It would be torture if we are expected to continuously do the things we hate; we will not be able to sustain it for sure. We need to embrace our purpose and enjoy each moment living it so that we can find fulfillment and satisfaction in our lives. There is nothing that brings better results than doing something that we enjoy doing. So go have fun living your purpose and in time, it will bring you remarkable results.

Purpose in a Larger Setting

Without us realising it, the concept of having a purpose has always been applied to organisations or the corporate world. It is fundamental that every organisation has a vision that defines the purpose of its existence. Each of its employees would strive to achieve this vision by performing well in their respective roles.



In order to impose focus, mission statements are established, spelling out smaller goals that an organisation needs to achieve in order to meet its vision. The mission statements go further into detail, determining specific deliverables and targets for the main areas of an organisation.

At the bottom, the ones that would actually drive the achievement of both the vision and mission of the organisation are the people; the foundation and core of an organisation. To help ensure that the vision and missions are achieved with the right substance and in the right way, the employees are guided by common shared values that specify the way one should behave and work.

The combination of all these different components eventually defines the working culture of an organisation – a typical purpose model of an organisation.

Live Life to the Fullest!

Life is too short and uncertain that it would be a waste for us not to live it to the fullest. It would be a meaningful one if we are able to define what we are all about – our purpose in life.

The best example of success by living a purpose is none other than our beloved Prophet Muhammad (صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم) himself. Since he started his Prophethood at the age of 40, up to his last breath at the age of 63, he dedicated his life to a

single purpose – to spread the monotheistic message of Islam; that there is only one God and complete surrender to Him is the only way of life.

23 years of dedication and commitment, tirelessly living his purpose to the best ability possible of any man, he had changed the world significantly as never seen by mankind. Humanity was put back in place with good moral values at its peak, in all aspects of life. Today, there are about 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide and it is the fastest growing religion in the world. This is the result of a great man living his purpose to the fullest, powered by a sincere love, belief and passion with the divine help of the Almighty.

So if you don't have a purpose yet, don't waste time any longer and go define one.

If you already have one, stop holding back – go all out and live it to the fullest.

Lastly, don't forget to have fun all the way! Make it worthwhile!